

THE RETURN ON KINDNESS

A CONVERSATION WITH BONNIE HAYDEN CHENG

Interview by Eric Collins



In the fast moving landscape of global business, kindness has long been pushed to the margins, treated as a soft luxury rather than a hard asset. Yet as we navigate a post pandemic era shaped by AI integration and a mounting global mental health crisis, Professor Bonnie Hayden Cheng is rewriting that narrative. As Professor and Head of the Department of Management, and the author of *The Return on Kindness: How Kind Leadership Wins Talent, Earns Loyalty, and Builds Successful Companies*,ⁱ we discuss themes around how kindness is the most undervalued strategic lever in the corporate toolkit.

How did you come across this topic of Return on Kindness (ROK)?

In my research on leadership and corporate wellness, I noticed a gap in how organisations define performance. The conversation is often dominated by metrics such as efficiency, profit margins, and productivity. But what stood out to me were the stories where acts of kindness, things that don't show up on a spreadsheet, were quietly driving impactful outcomes. That motivated me to spotlight this side of performance, because kindness is not just a soft skill, it is a critical driver of engagement and collective success.

Is it possible to be a kind leader without being seen as a “pushover”?

In conducting global interviews with leaders across industries, a clear theme emerged: kindness is a powerful leadership tool. When leaders practice kind leadership, they build trust, strengthen relationships, and create organisational cultures where people feel genuinely valued. But kindness is not about being a pushover or avoiding difficult conversations. In fact, true kindness requires toughness. The toughness comes, not from being harsh, but in maintaining high standards and

holding people accountable. That takes courage and consistency.

The real art of leadership lies in striking that balance. When kindness is paired with toughness, it becomes credible. Without accountability, kindness can feel like weakness. When you combine the two, it ensures that compassion doesn't slip into permissiveness, and it shows that you can deliver results and make hard decisions while still being a good person.

Do you see differences in how kindness is expressed in leadership when comparing Western cultures with Asian contexts?

Absolutely, cross-cultural leadership concepts are central here. In Asia, the work culture is markedly different, with long hours and extensive overtime. Many issues on employee well-being, such as stress and fatigue, are even more pronounced. At the

same time, kindness itself carries different cultural meanings and manifestations. In Western contexts, for example, kindness in leadership might be framed around diversity, equity, inclusion, and respect for individual boundaries. In Chinese contexts, kindness in leadership may be expressed more through promoting group harmony and collective responsibility. Both are genuine, but they reflect distinct cultural values, which makes understanding kindness in leadership complex - and fascinating! - given cultural nuances.

How about family-run businesses – do leadership styles differ here compared to larger international companies?

Yes, there are important layers to consider. Family-run businesses carry an added dimension of complexity because family dynamics inevitably shape leadership and workplace culture. Beyond family ownership, a meaningful distinction lies between small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and multinational corporations (MNCs). Larger organisations tend to

be more developed in their cultural values. They often have the resources to bring in external consultants to conduct values assessments and embed concepts around kindness into formal structures.

SMEs may not have those resources, yet they are often more nimble. Leaders in these settings can provide more direct and individualised attention and support to their people. So kindness manifests differently depending on organisational size and industry context, sometimes through formalised systems in large companies, and sometimes through personal or relational leadership in smaller ones.

In *The Return on Kindness* you raise the issue of burnout. How can we best deal with that?

Awareness of feelings is the starting point for any meaningful change. Burnout often creeps in gradually. It's a slow burn, and many people normalise the signs, especially in cultures where long hours and constant work pressure are accepted



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as the norm. Without awareness, people may not recognise what’s happening until the situation becomes severe.

By tuning into emotional cues early, you can name the experience. The act of labelling is powerful because it transforms these abstract feelings of “I feel off” into concrete insight, and insight into action. Once people can identify what they’re experiencing, they’re far more likely to reach out for support, whether from a peer, a mentor, or to seek organisational resources.

In that sense, self-awareness is the “inner work” we all need to do. It creates space for kindness, because only when we recognise and name our own emotional state can we intervene early and take proactive steps that protect our mental health and well-being.

You also mention that there is an upside to anxiety at work.

Anxiety is often framed as a negative, something we want to “fix” or “get rid of”. But my research emphasises its constructive side. From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety has played a critical role in human survival. Anxiety kept us alert to danger and motivated us to prepare

for challenges ahead. While the context has shifted from predators to deadlines, that same energy can still serve us if we learn to channel it productively. That means there is a productive dimension worth understanding.ⁱⁱ

At moderate levels, anxiety can actually be beneficial. It sharpens focus, heightens awareness, and motivates people to prepare more thoroughly. Many people even find that they perform best under the pressure of a deadline. That “edge” comes directly from anxiety.

How can we best deal with the downside?

The key is learning to harness that energy without allowing it to escalate into overwhelm. When people reframe anxiety as a challenge rather than a threat, it transforms into motivational fuel instead of something to fear.

For organisations, the opportunity lies in creating environments where anxiety can be acknowledged and discussed openly. This includes teaching strategies such as reframing anxious thoughts, normalising conversations about pressure, and encouraging employees to share effective coping approaches. There’s a lot organisations can do to help

employees channel anxiety into focus, essentially turning what is often seen as a liability into a source of strength.

Given that universities are educating future generations of leaders, could mindfulness programmes in the curricula help foster a culture of kindness?

I might be a little biased because of my research, but I genuinely believe there is a strong case for integrating mindfulness programmes into university curricula. The pressures of exams and deadlines mean that mental health challenges are widespread among students. Mindfulness offers practical strategies to manage stress and build resilience, while also helping students develop emotional awareness, empathy, and perspective. All of these skills are essential for navigating today’s complex workplace.

Education shouldn’t just be about intellectual achievement, but also about nurturing the whole person. We already see corporations investing in mindfulness programmes for their people. Universities have the same opportunity to prepare students for the workplace and for life. The more we equip students with these capacities, the greater the benefit for society as a whole.



Repeated acts of kindness can build strong cultures – the return on kindness is exponential.

Is Return on Kindness part of a new zeitgeist which is placing people first?

The idea of Return on Kindness resonates so strongly today because it reflects a cultural shift already underway. For decades, business success was measured almost exclusively by profits and shareholder value. But in this new era, especially with AI taking on much of the technical work, the true differentiator becomes distinctly human. Skills such as kindness, empathy, and humility, once dismissed as “soft”, are proving to be key to organisational success, because these are skills that cannot be automated.

The ROK captures this by showing



that kindness generates measurable returns in terms of trust, innovation, and resilience. In that sense, kindness is the foundation of success as humanity remains our competitive advantage.

Finally, how can each of us personally make a Return on Kindness?

Each of us can create a Return on Kindness by treating everyday interactions as opportunities to create value. That will look different for everyone. It could be giving someone your undivided attention, recognising a colleague’s contribution, or showing patience and understanding in moments of stress. These may seem like small gestures, but over time they accumulate and shape the culture around us.

We discussed how repeated instances of fatigue can build into burnout. Similarly, repeated acts of kindness can build into strong positive cultures. And, kindness is reciprocal. There’s this boomerang effect. When you extend kindness, it often comes back to you in unexpected ways.

When we consistently embed kindness into how we make decisions and how we treat each other, it becomes a sustainable practice. Every single person has the capacity to generate it. If we collectively strive for that, the return on kindness is exponential.

Thank you so much, Bonnie.



True kindness requires toughness – the courage to maintain high standards while still being a good person.

ⁱ Cheng, B. H. (2023). The Return on Kindness: How kind leadership wins talent, earns loyalty, and builds successful companies. Penguin Business.

ⁱⁱ Cheng, B. H., & McCarthy, J. M. (2018). Understanding the dark and bright sides of anxiety: A theory of workplace anxiety. Journal of Applied Psychology, 103(5), 537.